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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to test the notion that effective business writing can be taught with half the "usual" number of teacher-graded papers, thereby allowing teachers to devote more of their time to more creative teaching strategies. Ten instructors and 29 sections of an informational writing class were involved in the study. The design of the study included two phases: a pretest-posttest analysis of each of the two instructional methods as well as a comparison of their relative effectiveness, and a regression analysis to predict posttest scores or final grades on the basis of American College Test (ACT), College Qualification Test (CQT), or pretest scores of writing ability. Although no significant predictor of writing achievement was found, the results indicated that information business writing can be taught effectively with fewer teacher-graded papers. (Author/RL)

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REDUCING THE NUMBER OF TEACHER-GRADED PAPERS IN THE TEACHING OF INFORMATIONAL BUSINESS WRITING

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ABSTRACT

During the Fall Semester of 1980, a study was conducted at Western Michigan University to test the notion that effective business writing can be taught with half the "usual" number of teacher-graded papers in order to allow teachers to devote more of their time to more creative teaching strategies. Ten instructors and twenty-nine sections of Informational Writing were involved in the study.

The design of the study included two phases: Phase One involved a pre-posttest analysis of each of the two instructional methods as well as a comparison of their relative effectiveness. Phase Two involved a regression analysis in order to predict posttest scores or final grades on the basis of ACT, CQT, or pretest scores.

The results indicate that informational business writing can be taught effectively with fewer teacher-graded papers. However, no significant predictor of writing achievement was found.

INTRODUCTION

Can informational business writing be taught effectively with fewer teacher-graded papers? This was the question asked in a study conducted at Western Michigan University during the Fall Semester of 1980.

Studies by Denman [1], Hansen [2], Hart [3] and others suggest effective alternatives to teacher-graded papers in teaching writing at the college level. However, teachers traditionally have relied upon teacher-graded papers as the major, perhaps only, way to teach writing. The result often has been twofold: Students have been "turned off" to writing, and teachers have been "burned out" in their efforts to teach writing.

The purpose of this study was to test the notion that beginning informational business writing can be taught effectively with fewer than the "usual" number of teacher-graded papers and with a greater variety of

teaching methods. A secondary purpose was to gather and test data that could help predict student success in the course so that students with inadequate ability or skill levels could be identified and counseled accordingly.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Ten instructors and 29 (of 37) class sections of Informational Writing, a business-oriented developmental composition course (freshman level) in the College of Business were included in the study. The sample included 74 subjects selected randomly from an accessible student population of 785. The potential student population was 960 for the 37 class sections.

Two methods of instruction were tested in the study. Method A included 16 or 17 teacher-graded papers, and Method B included the equivalent of eight and one-half teacher-graded papers. Each method contained a set of core requirements.

Limitations to the study involved sample size, sample representativeness, and experimental controls. First, the size of the sample was limited because of practical considerations of time and expense. Participating instructors graded the sample voluntarily, and the study was not funded. Secondly, although elaborate procedures were employed to assure a random sample, seven class sections were not part of the accessible student population because one instructor declined to participate, one became ill at the start of the project, and one was not included because of part-time status. Finally, a quasi-experimental status can be assigned to the study because controls were not instituted to ensure uniformity in teaching methods and conditions.

PROCEDURES

Following are explanations of the study's data-gathering procedure, hypotheses, teaching and grading methods, and sample selection:

Data-Gathering Procedure

Data for the study were gathered by the following instruments: verbal ability by the College Qualifications Test (CQT) and the American College Test (ACT); achievement in learning by pre-posttest essay scores and final grades; and related data by a data sheet developed by the investigators.

Both the pretest and posttest instruments were identical in requesting the same information from students; however, each instrument differed slightly in rationale:

Pretest

Please provide a sample of your writing by writing a five-paragraph essay of about 250 words on the topic: "How College Will Help Me in My Career."

This sample will be used to help assess your writing strengths and design instruction to help you improve your writing skills.

Plan to complete your essay within forty-five minutes.

When you have finished, write your social security number on the back of your essay (in the upper-right-hand corner). Do not place your name on the essay.

Please do not write on this sheet of paper.

Posttest

Please provide a sample of your writing by writing a five-paragraph essay of about 250 words on the topic: "How College Will Help Me in My Career."

This sample will help identify your writing strengths and assess your writing development during this course.

Plan to complete your essay within forty-five minutes.

When you have finished, write your social security number on the back of your essay (in the upper-right-hand corner). Do not place your name on the essay.

Please do not write on this sheet of paper.

The pretest, CQT, and data sheet were administered by the participating instructors before actual instruction began. Students were limited to 45 minutes in writing their pretest and posttest essay. Instructions for issuing differing syllabuses for Method A and Method B instruction were these:

1. Hand out syllabuses.
2. Mention: "This syllabus may differ some from other 142 classes in the number of graded assignments and the points allocated to them. This does not mean either an increase or decrease in your workload, the amount of writing, or the total points allocated. This does reflect, however, an experiment conducted this semester in a number of classes as part of our effort to find ways to improve instruction and learning."

3. Answer questions, but don't discuss the specific differences between the syllabuses. Emphasize that "It's just an effort to help improve our writing courses--so don't worry about it."
4. Try not to mention the experiment again during the semester.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses, tested for significance at the .05 level by the t-test or multiple regression, included that there will be: (1) no significant difference between pre-posttest essay scores in Method A; (2) no significant difference between pre-posttest essay scores in Method B; (3) no significant difference between Methods A and B as measured by gains or losses in pre-posttest essay scores; and (4) no significant relationship between CQT, ACT, or pretest essay scores (as predictors) and post-test essay scores or final grades (as criterion variables).

Teaching and Grading Methods

Participating instructors were assigned voluntarily to either or both methods. The ten participating instructors, each experienced in teaching developmental and business writing, were given orientation to both instructional methods. Also, the instructors were asked to keep a log or record of teaching methods (and their effectiveness) used in place or in addition to teacher-graded papers. Alternative teaching methods reported in the literature were disseminated and discussed as part of the orientation process.

Both Methods A and B were based on 500 points earned over a 16-week semester; both methods also required a computerized grammar-punctuation exercise that accounted for 24 of the 500 points. Whereas Method A devoted 420 of its 500 points to teacher-graded papers, Method B devoted from 300 to 325 points to teacher-graded papers. The balance of the points in either method could be earned by students in ways not requiring a teacher-graded paper; however, such ways could include quizzes, tests, and homework.

Seven of the ten participating instructors taught one or more sections of Method A; five of the seven instructors had taught from Method A core requirements previously. The core requirements for Method A included 16 or 17 teacher-graded papers as follows:

Method A: Six short papers (one paragraph or outline).
 Three required rewrites of short papers.
 Four long papers (three-plus paragraphs).
 Four required rewrites of long papers.

Note: An option was included that permitted five long papers and the required rewrites of any two.

Nine of the ten participating instructors taught one or more sections of Method B. One of the nine instructors had taught from the core requirements of Method B previously (in a pilot study during the Summer Session of 1980). The core requirements for Method B included the equivalent of eight and one-half teacher-graded papers as follows:

Method B: Two short papers (one-to-three paragraphs each).
 One optional rewrite of a short paper. The grade of the rewrite is averaged with that of the original.
 Four long papers (five-paragraph essay).
 Two optional rewrites of long papers. The grade of each rewrite is averaged with that of the original.
 One short informational report (of at least eleven paragraphs in length). No rewrite option.

Toward the end of the semester, the participating instructors were given instructions and practice in grading the pre-posttest essays. The essays were graded on a ten-point scale. Each essay received two independent readings. A version of the controlled reading of pre-posttest essay was used [4]. Those essays receiving scores varying by more than one point received a third independent reading, and the two closest scores were averaged. Thirty-two of the 124 pre-posttest essays (or 25.8 percent) received a third reading.

Two practice sessions were conducted prior to grading the pre-posttest essays. The grading criteria, established prior to the grading sessions, were based on the established grading criteria already familiar to the participating instructors. The grading criteria, divided into three sections and weighted equally on mechanics, style, and content, were discussed and applied to five sample papers in each of the two practice sessions. The instructors discussed each paper, explaining their application of the grading criteria and their final score.

For each practice session, the Kendall W (coefficient of concordance) was used to determine the extent to which the participating instructors were in agreement in identifying strong and weak papers [5]. The group achieved a .48 in the initial session and a .43 in the second session, indicating a consistent but moderate level of agreement. Since the average scores assigned to papers differed considerably from person to person and from session to session, pretest-posttest grading teams were formed on the basis of the closest mean scores from the two practice sessions. This adjustment was made to assure that the same criteria were applied to both the pretest and posttest essays by the same person and that the variability in scores was minimized. Team identification was coded, thus not made known to the participating instructors. The pre-posttest essays were coded and graded on a blind and independent basis.

Sample Selection

The sample of 74 subjects was randomly selected (by table of random numbers) on a stratified basis by instructor and class sections from

a total accessible student population of 785. The sample representing students taught by Method A included 20 male and 17 female subjects. Further, this sample included four black students in the Martin Luther King Program. The sample representing students taught by Method B included 23 males and 14 females. Four black students, also Martin Luther King Program participants, were part of the sample. Also included were four foreign students.

Sample selection steps were taken to assure a random, representative sample: These steps: (1) eliminated five sections of Method B in order to equate the number of class sections of Methods A and B at 12 each; (2) included at least one or more class sections of each of the ten participating instructors; (3) coded all data for anonymity; (4) selected 20 subjects (who had written both pretest and posttest essays) from Method A sections (three subjects from each of six instructors and two subjects from the seventh instructor); (5) selected 20 subjects (who had written pretest and posttest essays) from Method B sections (two subjects from each of seven instructors and three subjects from the eighth and ninth instructors respectively); (6) selected 24 subjects (who had written pretest essays only), one from each of the 24 class sections (12 from Method A and 12 from Method B) in order to include those students who either ceased attending because of impending failure or who failed to take the posttest--but who in either case received a final grade for the course; (7) arranged the sample essays into five packets--each packet containing 24 or 25 essays--ten pretest and posttest essays (by the same ten students) as well as four or five pretests only (by four or five additional students who had not written posttest essays); (8) assigned a packet to each of the five grading teams by code; (9) made copies of each packet; and (10) distributed the packets to each of the ten participating instructors for grading.

RESULTS

The results of the study are summarized:

Verbal Ability

Although subjects in Methods A (N=25) and B (N=25) differed in verbal ability as measured by the CQT (.05 level), there was no significant difference between the groups when the four foreign students were omitted from Method B. Also, when foreign students, black students, and students with incomplete data were omitted from the sample, subjects in Method A (N=18) and B (N=14) did not differ significantly (.05 level) in either CQT or ACT scores.

Hypotheses

The study's first two null hypotheses were each rejected at the .05 level. There was significant gain between pre-posttest scores of subjects in both Methods A and B as indicated in the following data:

	<u>Mean Essay Score</u> (pre)	<u>Mean Essay Score</u> (post)	<u>Mean Gain</u>	<u>t-Value</u>
Method A (N=25)	6.38	7.09	.71	3.24
Method B (N=25)	6.13	6.79	.66	3.14

When black and foreign students were omitted from the sample, the results remained significant:

	<u>Mean Essay Score</u> (pre)	<u>Mean Essay Score</u> (post)	<u>Mean Gain</u>	<u>t-Value</u>
Method A (N=22)	6.33	7.10	.77	3.26
Method B (N=18)	6.51	7.09	.58	2.43

However, pre-posttest mean gains for black and foreign students were not significant at the .05 level:

	<u>Mean Essay Score</u> (pre)	<u>Mean Essay Score</u> (post)	<u>Mean Gain</u>	<u>t-Value</u>
Black Students (N=6)	6.65	6.91	.26	.70
Foreign Students (N=4)	4.08	5.45	1.37	1.94

Further, no significant difference existed between Methods A and B in pre-posttest mean gains as indicated by these data:

	<u>Mean Essay Gain</u> (pre-posttest)	<u>Difference</u>	<u>t-Value</u>
Method A (N=25)	.71	.05	.20
Method B (N=25)	.66		
Or:			
Method A (N=22)	.77	.19	.54
Method B (N=18)	.58		

Thus, the third hypothesis was accepted.

The final hypothesis also was accepted at the .05 level because neither CQT, ACT nor pretest scores was a significant predictor for either posttest scores or final grades. This result was found by multiple regression analysis of the sample (N=32). Sex also was found not to be a significant predictor of posttest scores or final grades. Race and foreign-student status were not tested as predictors because of limited sample size.

Additionally, multiple correlation analysis indicated a low-to-moderate positive relationship between pretest scores and final grades ($r=.40$), and a low positive relationship between ACT scores and post scores ($r=.36$) at the .05 level. No other significant relationship was found except that posttest scores correlated moderately positive with final grades ($r=.51$) and ACT scores correlated substantially positive

with CQT scores ($r=.78$) at the .05 level with the sample at $N=32$.

When posttest scores were used as a predictor along with CQT and pretest scores for final grades on the sample ($N=50$) in a regression analysis, posttest scores proved to be the best "low" positive predictor ($R=.37$) compared with pretest scores ($R=.28$) and CQT scores ($R=.24$) at the .05 level.

Moreover, regression and multiple correlation analysis of CQT and pretest scores relative to final grades, on subjects who failed to take the posttest ($N=24$), indicated no significant predictors or relationships for Method A, Method B, or for Methods A and B combined.

Teacher Logs

An analysis of teacher logs indicated that most participating instructors (1) supplemented teacher-graded papers with alternative teaching strategies, (2) felt that Method B allowed them more time to use a greater number and variety of "creative" alternatives to teacher-graded papers, and (3) found no discernible difference between the quality of student writing between Methods A and B.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following conclusions and recommendations are offered with caution because of the limited sample size and the quasi-experimental nature of this study:

Conclusions

The overall conclusion is that informational business writing can be taught effectively with fewer than 16 or 17 teacher-graded papers. Further, with fewer teacher-graded papers, teachers have more time for creative teaching.

Specific conclusions include these:

1. Both methods of instruction teach informational business writing effectively.
2. Neither method is superior to the other in teaching informational writing effectively.
3. Verbal ability (as measured by either ACT or CQT) and pretest scores are not effective predictors of either effective writing achievement or of final grades in informational business writing.
4. Even posttest scores are only a "low" predictor of final grades in informational business writing.
5. ACT and CQT measure essentially the same ability.

Recommendations

Specific recommendations include these:

1. This study should be replicated with a larger sample including more black and foreign students and a more experimentally-controlled design.
2. Core syllabus requirements for the Informational Writing course should reflect a balance between the number of teacher-graded papers and effective alternatives for the teacher of informational business writing.
3. The verbal section of the ACT or CQT, or pretest-essay scores should not be used as the only means of predicting a student's potential success in informational business writing.
4. Informational Writing should be made more competency based so that the final grades more accurately reflect writing-skill improvement.

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